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Fish and Wildlife Service Announces Draft Environmental Assessment for Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan

Public comment invited

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the availability of a draft environmental assessment for "Guidelines for Living with Florida Panthers and the Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan" in today's *Federal Register*. The public is invited to submit written comments on the draft guidelines and response plan by July 24, 2006.

"The Service, the National Park Service, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission are working together to ensure public safety by establishing protocols for responding to encounters between people and panthers," said Sam D. Hamilton, southeast regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "At the same time, we are also trying to address the conservation needs of this critically endangered animal and citizens the information they need to live safely in panther country."

Two years ago, the three agencies formed an interagency response team to help address Florida panther interactions with humans. As the human population of south Florida has continued to grow, so too has the population of Florida panthers. Recovery actions have increased the panther population from 20 to 30 animals to roughly 80 animals in 2005. During this same period, the human population in Florida has increased by about four and a half million people, from 14.2 million in 1995 to an estimated 17.8 million people in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The response plan, when finalized, will provide guidance to the agencies on how to respond to and manage panther and human interactions. The guidelines also call for the agencies to concurrently educate the community about safe behavior when living and recreating in panther habitat.

While there has never been a documented attack of a Florida panther on a human, Florida panthers have been reported to take domestic livestock or pets.

"They are shy, secretive animals that few people have seen," said Darrell Land, a panther biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "However, panthers are large predators and we need to put policies in place to deal with the potential for encounters with people. Our plan seeks to empower people with knowledge about living safely with panthers. "

The draft Environmental Assessment considers three alternatives for managing interactions between humans and panthers, including the Interagency Panther Response Plan, which is the preferred alternative.

The public is invited to download a copy of the *Federal Register* notice and the Environmental Assessment at <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach>. For more information, please contact Layne Hamilton, Refuge Manager, Florida Panther and Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, 3860 Tollgate Boulevard, Suite 300, Naples, Florida 34114, (239) 353-8442 or facsimile (239) 353-8640. Elizabeth Souheaver at the Service's Southeast Regional Office also may be contacted at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1875 Century Boulevard, Suite 420, Atlanta, Georgia 30345, (404) 679-7163 or facsimile (404) 679-4082.

Written comments on the draft guidelines and response plan may be mailed, faxed, or hand-delivered to either Layne Hamilton or Elizabeth Souheaver at the above addresses. Comments can also be submitted via e-mail to pantherresponseplan@fws.gov. Please send comments as an ASCII file and avoid the use of special characters or any form of encryption. Also please include your name and return address in your internet message. If a confirmation of receipt is not received, please contact either of the above-listed telephone numbers.

To implement the final Guidelines for Living with Florida Panthers and the Interagency Response plan, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is seeking an amendment to its permit to conduct activities with endangered and threatened species. This request is included in the same *Federal Register* notice. The amendment would give authorization to take (capture, harass, remove) the Florida panther when conducting duties according to the guidelines.

If you have questions or wish to comment on the Commission's permit amendment application, please contact: Victoria Davis, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1875 Century Boulevard, Suite 200, Atlanta, Georgia 30345, (404) 679-7163, facsimile (404) 679-7081 or e-mail at Victoria_Davis@fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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